

June 24, 2008

Appropriations Committee APPROVES BIG INCREASE IN MILEAGE COMPENSATION FOR VETERANS, Obey Says

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The House Appropriations Committee, Chaired by Seventh District Congressman Dave Obey (D-WI), today voted to increase VA mileage compensation by nearly fifty percent to help veterans who have to drive long distances to receive care. Last year, the Committee approved the first VA mileage compensation increase since 1979, and with today's increase, has nearly quadrupled the rate over the last two years.

"Raising the rate to 41.5 cents per mile may not seem like a lot, but with gas prices what they are, for some veterans - like those in my District that have to drive a long way to see a VA doctor - it's the difference between being able to afford to get medical care or not," said Obey.

The increase in mileage compensation was included in the FY09 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill, which cleared a major hurdle with Committee approval today. The bill is intended to "send a clear message to America's servicemen and women, their families, and our veterans that we all appreciate and respect their service and sacrifice," Obey said. "While we have a long way to go in the legislative process, this bill builds on the efforts of the last two years, as this Congress has made veterans its #1 priority."

Obey noted that in 2007 Congress passed 3 separate appropriations bills that increased total funding for Veterans medical care by \$11.8 billion, so that veterans can receive the quality of care they deserve. "The emergency funding bill passed by the House last week continued those efforts with further increases for VA medical care and rewarded those who serve by expanding the GI bill to provide a full, four-year college benefit to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars," Obey added.

“Overall, we add nearly \$3 billion more than the President requested for the VA, providing the resources to allow the Department to hire over 2,000 new claims processors to work through the backlog and get veterans into the system faster, and putting an additional \$1.6 billion into the Veterans Health Administration to increase access to services, ensure safer facilities and improve treatment for veterans,” Obey said.

Building on last year's historic funding increases, Obey said that, if passed, the bill will allow the VA to:

- increase enrollment of veterans for VA services;
- address the backlog in maintenance at VA medical facilities;
- improve access to healthcare for veterans in areas where the VA does not offer services;
- increase availability of new generation prosthetics;
- substantially increase funding for research into trauma, mental health and other critical areas to find the best treatments for veterans; and
- provide additional case workers and medical services for homeless veterans.

For active duty service members and their families, Obey noted that the bill provides \$336 million above the President's request for quality of life projects that will directly improve living conditions and health care delivery, including the modernization of training facilities, as well as the building of child care centers, barracks, and housing.

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